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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

We have been able to give you several documents recently showing what is in the minds of our fellow-Christians in the European and American Continents. Here is another which is of exceptional interest as revealing the response of some Christians in Germany to the experience of suffering through which they, like us, are passing.

BEYOND THE CONFLICT

It is part of a sermon preached some weeks ago by Pastor von Bodelschwingh after a hospital at Bethel near Bielefeld had been hit in an air-raid. Bethel is one of the most important centres of home and foreign missionary activity in Germany. In the early days of the struggle between the Evangelical Church and the Nazi Movement Pastor von Bodelschwingh was put forward by the best elements of the Church in Germany as Reichsbishop against Hitler's nomination of the notorious Dr. Müller. He said in the sermon :

" In the past week we have experienced a darker calamity than any which Bethel has previously known. A cruel and indiscriminate war operation has hurled death and destruction upon the houses in which mercy does her hidden service to sick and little people. Here in the House of God we do not speak of the injustice that men have done to us, but bow ourselves quietly under the mighty hand of God. What does He desire to say to us through such experiences?

" When such thunder and lightning shatters the security of our life, it is the health-giving grace of God which disciplines and admonishes us, and shows us eternity close behind our life. To become conscious of the closeness of eternity is a holy gift for the sons of men.

" Bright waves of love have in these days met the dark waves of suffering. It is as though the service at Bethel suddenly became visible again to many eyes as a concern upon the heart of the whole German nation. But there is also this greater thing: many prayers have been offered for us in these days. The strength that comes from sympathy, intercession and love in time of need is a holy gift to the sons of men. . . .

" When I laid my hand on the forehead of a seriously-wounded little girl, and spoke her name aloud, and said: ' My dear little daughter, even if the British have shot you half to pieces, you are still our dear child,' such a beam of joy and beauty passed over the disfigured face that I was deeply moved. . . .

" When I said good-bye the day before yesterday to our young dying colleague, the shadow of deep suffering lay upon her face. But through the darkness of death came a bright gleam when I thanked her again in the name of us all for her service in life and death. And the light grew brighter when we looked out from all the tribulations of earthly history to the place where one day the mystery of the terrible night of Bethel will be solved. She and I were quite comforted when we realised that she was gathered up like a child in her Father's hand, and that beyond everything that collapses and passes away on earth there stands the immovable Kingdom of God, which is the home of us all.

" So I brought with me from that deathbed the prayer that through the hard experience of these recent days we may be more firmly united with those who wait for the coming of the

Lord Jesus. If we remain under His rule and in His love, then all things must work together for our good. Then holy joy will grow even out of the deepest suffering. For God is faithful, by whom we are called unto the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

THE CHURCH IN NORWAY

Nazi rule is such that conflicts with the Church are unavoidable. The infringement of justice by the Quisling Government in Norway and restrictions on the freedom of the Christian ministry have evoked strong protests from the Norwegian Church. Seven Bishops addressed a letter some time ago to the Government about the excesses of the Norwegian Nazi movement, complaining that the Government not only failed to prevent violence but actually encouraged it. The reply to this protest, received after a considerable lapse of time, was unsatisfactory. The Bishops thereupon issued a letter to be read in all the churches on February 9th. The letter included the following courageous declaration of the responsibility and duty of the Church:

" Can the Church watch quietly while the institutions of God are being neglected and many things happen to dissolve Order and Right? The Church is a body whose task it is to pronounce the words of God and to gather all who believe in a life according to God's will. As a body in the world the Church is a human institution with human faults, and suffers from the fact that we sinful human beings are her tools. Ever since the days of the Apostles, however, the Lord of the Church has called upon such men to be her servants, and has promised them the mercy and strength with which He Himself is advancing His power. The Christian community is a living spiritual body, established by Jesus Christ and having in Him its Saviour and Lord. The Church, therefore, is the work of God and must fulfil her task frankly and fearlessly, because the will and the word of God is above everything else in this earth. The bishops of the Norwegian Church, therefore, in view of the anxiety of conscience and the uncertain questions which recently have met us, have seen it to be our duty, from a Christian point of view, to tell our meaning plainly to the authorities which to-day are in charge of the life of the Church and the State."

The letter was read in a number of churches. On the following Sunday the police were ordered to attend Divine service at every church in Norway and observe whether the instructions prohibiting prayers for the Royal House of Norway and the reading of the pastoral letter were carried out. This attempt to regiment the Church in Norway has been the subject of outspoken criticism in the Swedish press.

KARL BARTH ON THE CHURCH AND POLITICS

The recent Supplement by Professor Karl Barth aroused widespread interest. Some of you may like to know more about where he stands in the acute controversies of our time. An article in the small broadsheet *Presbyter*, gives the substance of a chapter on " The State's Service of God " in the Gifford Lectures which he gave shortly before the war in Aberdeen.[1] From this article I take the following (supplemented at one or two points from the Lectures themselves):

(1) The true question is not what the Church has to say about politics to statesmen or the general public, but what it has to say to *men of faith*. Any other kind of speech is quite outside the limits of its Commission.

(2) What, then, has the Church to say to Christian believers about the political order? First, that the political order has a place in God's design for men, and a service to render to God, distinct from the place and service of the Church. The purpose of political order is to secure that the will of God is done in the life of mankind as a whole—outside, as well as within, the sphere of faith ; that is to say to establish *outward* peace, freedom and justice. The state is as truly " ordained of God " as the Church.

(3) But the State just as much as the Church is ordained of *God*—that is to say, the God who is revealed in Christ. Christ is Lord not only of the Church but also of the world. There is no other law derived from some other source than the Christian revelation which provides principles for the conduct of the State.

[1] *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God.* Hodder & Stoughton. 12s. 6d.

(4) It is none the less true that the political sphere is one which is *not yet* the sphere of the Church. Any attempt to ignore this fact and to set up the Kingdom of saints in a world which is not yet subject to the obedience of faith is contrary to the truth of things and must lead to frustration and disillusionment.

(5) While this must be freely recognized, political authorities and systems are at the same time subject to criticism in the light of Christian standards and to criticism in and by the Church.

(6) It must not, however, be supposed that the first and last thing that Christians have to demand of the State is that those who direct it should themselves be Christians. God has given the state a particular task—the maintenance of outward freedom, justice and peace, and the only relevant question is whether the state is carrying out rightly the secular task entrusted to it. A government of professing Christians may be a bad government and a government of non-Christians a very good government.

(7) The concrete advice which the Church gives to its members must depend on how the State is doing its job. If the government is a real government, honestly trying to carry out its tasks, believing men must give it their active support. To refuse to do our duty as citizens is to deny God just as much as to disavow our faith. Members of the Church who evade or resist legislation that makes for justice deserve the rebuke and discipline of the Church.

(8) There may be Governments, however, which are so untrue to their God-given task that Christians cannot actively co-operate with them, but only endure them. There may even be a point at which there is a right and duty to *rebel*. Such rebellion is in the name, not of the Church against the State, but of a true political order against a usurping tyranny. If to resist becomes our duty, we must not shrink from active resistance through fear that it may lead to forcible resistance. We must not try to evade the consequences of fulfilling our duty. "The world needs men, and it would be sad if it were just the Christians who did not wish to be men."

A RELIGION AND LIFE WEEK FOR THE TROOPS

A religion and life week for those serving in the Forces was held last month in the East Riding of Yorkshire. With the approval and co-operation of the military authorities, a series of talks was given on four successive days simultaneously in six different centres. The attendances were large, and the general meetings were supplemented by smaller meetings with groups of officers and conferences with chaplains. The results were such as to encourage the extension of efforts along these lines. The Bishop of Hull, who was the prime mover in the enterprise, makes the following comment: "There is one impression that stands out above all others. It is of vital importance to the future of Christianity in this country. There is a wide gulf in thought and idea between those who attend Church and those who do not. Our whole paraphernalia of prayer, worship, reading and speaking, are clearly useless for the majority of non-churchgoing, but not unsympathetic, men and women. Our ordinary Church language is meaningless jargon. These men and women eager and anxious for deeper truth will not find their need met in Christ, unless the leaders of the Church are prepared to go to school and learn the language of thought and expression which will help ordinary men and women to understand what Christianity is. Much of what we are now doing might just as well be in Latin. The crucial need of our time is for a language of the Gospel understanded of the people."

What the Bishop says cannot, I think, be put too strongly. We must at the same time keep clearly before us the end to which it is the means. That end is that the common man may recover an understanding of the message and thought of the Bible. To bridge the gulf, we must all the time be building the bridge from *both* ends. The Church has to learn a new language, and this is so necessary that it may be right to concentrate for a bit on this task, just as a missionary to a foreign country has to spend his first two years in learning its language. But the outward movement of the Church must evoke a corresponding movement of response in which the ordinary man discovers meanings in life which are at present a closed book to him.

THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

I have already called attention (C.N-L. No. 64) to Mr. Christopher Dawson's article in the *Dublin Review* on "The Sword of the Spirit." The issues which it raises are so fundamental that I continually go back to it.

The supreme menace which threatens to-day to overwhelm the life of man is the totalitarian state or totalitarian community. What makes the danger greater than any which mankind has before encountered is that the holders of power are able with the aid of modern technical inventions not only to dominate the outward life of men but to invade the citadel of their souls. I want to have one or more Supplements on the action that is needed to combat this deadly threat to man's existence. But the source from which all else must flow is made plain in Mr. Dawson's paper. The place where we must all begin is the recovery of faith in the power of the Spirit and the surrender of ourselves to that power. If we believe, as we profess to believe as Christians, that the Spirit is at work in the world, that the power of the Spirit is stronger than any material or purely human power, and that men have the choice to resist or ignore or, on the other hand, to co-operate with, this divine action, then our first preoccupation must be to let ourselves become the channels of these spiritual forces. " Here," Mr. Dawson writes, " we have a really dynamic vitalism, in comparison with which the new biological vitalism of blood and race and the old pagan vitalism of the gods of the earth, are weak and degraded and obscure." No force can be brought to bear on the situation that can be compared with the growth of a body of people who yield themselves to the spiritual powers which are able to invade history by invading first the souls of men and taking possession of their lives.

A WORD OF THANKS

I wish to thank those who have generously responded to our appeal for back numbers. We have now enough copies to go ahead with the re-binding of Volume I. I take this opportunity of thanking also the many members who in renewing their subscriptions have added a small extra donation. During the last six months these gifts have amounted to a total of £115 17s. 4d.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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